

*Saturn's Jews: On the Witches' Sabbath and Sabbateanism.* By Moshe Idel. Kogod Library of Judaic Studies, vol. 10.

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Meticulously investigating the conceptual history of Saturn, the seventh planet in medieval astrology, Moshe Idel describes how the association between Jews and Saturn developed mainly in the Jewish tradition from the twelfth through the twentieth centuries. This comprehensive study has been long awaited by the ardent readers of his research, for parts of the book are based on his previously published articles.<sup>1</sup> As is shown in the subtitle, the first chapter expounds the development of sinister aspects of Saturn, Jews and Sabbath, or the seventh day of the week, which was generally attributed to magic or sorcery. It was mainly in astrological kabbalah that positive interpretations of Saturn emerged. Aside from this detailed overview and the third chapter where Idel makes a few hypothetical statements on certain modern Jewish figures of melancholic disposition, my review is to focus on the second chapter: "From Saturn to Sabbatai Tzevi: A Planet That Became Messiah."

Sabbatai Tzevi (1626–1676), who was born in Ottoman Smyrna, is obviously one of the most famous figures in early modern Jewish history and also notorious as a self-proclaimed messiah. He played both a symbolic and a charismatic role in the messianic movement and its peripheral phenomena named Sabbateanism. Some cities of the Ottoman Empire such as Gaza, Cairo, Smyrna, Constantinople and Salonica were the center of the movement. The messianic propaganda had eschatological influence even among the remote Jewish communities in some European countries, until Tzevi converted to Islam in 1666. His ostensible apostasy was regarded as a messianic mission by leading believers. Not merely the justification of his messiahship in the earlier days but this seemingly paradoxical denouement was explained within the framework of kabbalah.

While the most thorough and widely accepted description of Sabbateanism as a culmination in Jewish history was provided by Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) in his famous monograph, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*,<sup>2</sup> some new perspectives and analyses have recently put forward other possible explanations.<sup>3</sup> Among them, *Saturn's Jews* is the latest publication. Idel focuses on the association between Saturn and Sabbatai Tzevi; Sabbatai (*Shabtai* in Hebrew) is a customary name for a Jewish male infant born on Sabbath, which also signifies Saturn. The linkage between this messianic figure and the planetary nomenclature is mentioned in some Sabbatean documents. Although no systematic

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- 1 "Saturn and Sabbatai Tzevi: A New Approach to Sabbateanism," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Mark Cohen (Brill, Leiden, 1998), pp. 173–202, and the Hebrew translation in *Madāei ha-Yahadut* 37 (World Union of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 161–84. *Messianic Mystics* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998) pp. 187–197. "Saturn, Schabbat, Zauberei und die Juden," in *Der Magus* (Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 2001), S.209–249. *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2010), p. 9.
  - 2 Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, trans. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). The original Hebrew edition was published in 1957; Werblowsky translated it into English with newly discovered sources.
  - 3 For instance: Elisheve Carlebach, *The Pursuit of Heresy: Rabbi Moshe Hagiz and the Sabbatean Controversies* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1990); Abraham Elqayam, *The Mystery of Faith in the Writings of Nathan of Gaza*, Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993 (in Hebrew); Yehuda Liebes, *On Sabbateanism and Its Kabbalah: Collected Essays* (Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1995, in Hebrew); Jacob Barnai, *Sabbateanism: Social Perspectives* (Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, Jerusalem, 2000, in Hebrew).

expositions or thematic treatises were authored by believers, Idel accumulates several sporadic references to demonstrate the fact that some of them shared a unanimous image. On the basis of it, saturnian characteristics were believed to be embodied in the synonymous figure, Sabbatai Tzevi.

According to Idel, Sabbateanism is not to be ascribed to a single bedrock or a rectilinear historiography of Judaism. He makes an emphatic point on the conceptual element of Saturn as one of the multiple causes in which Sabbateanism incubated. His theoretical underpinning is that Jewish culture can be characterized as a continuous oscillation between the “particularistic” and the “universalistic” pole. The idea of fluctuating motion between two opposite cultural natures, to be sure, is not uncommon. Still, it obviously provides us with a beneficial perspective in examining Sabbateanism. Idel analyzes the history of a conceptual structure and gives us a new methodological apparatus, which demonstrates that references to Saturn might have their origin in earlier astrological discourses shared among Jews, Muslims and Christians in the Middle Ages. Scholem, on the other hand, attributed the inception of the Sabbatean movement exclusively to the diffusion of Lurianic kabbalah in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and asserted that its eschatological nature had resulted from the traumatic expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the fifteenth century. Scholem must have known the association between Saturn and Sabbatai Tzevi, but did not fathom its significance.

The attribution of Saturn to Sabbatai Tzevi has a ground in the kabbalistic idea of ten intradivine elements, *sefirot*, in which the third *sefirah*, *Binah*, signifies divine understanding and is believed to have to do with the redemption of the Jews. The affinity of *Binah* to redemption dates back to the earliest kabbalists: Isaac Sagi-Nahor, Joseph Gikatilla and the author of the *Zohar*. However, according to Idel, Saturn was not mentioned in the reference to *Binah* at this stage. It was not until Abraham Abulafia (1240–c. 1291) and Joseph Ashkenazi (c. 1270–c. 1325) articulated the connection between *Binah* and Saturn that the planet began to obtain a positive and messianic sense. Saturn, which had in many cases been regarded as negative, was here related to redemption in the triadic connection: Saturn, *Binah* and Messiah.

The most important element for our argument is not the conceptual association by the two kabbalists so much as the emergence of *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*, which was composed by an anonymous author in the late fourteenth or the early fifteenth century in the Byzantine Empire. The latter includes excerpts from Abraham Abulafia and Joseph Ashkenazi's writings and also from *Sefer ha-Temunah*, which played an indispensable role in forming the messianic understanding of *Bihah*. As is well known from some sources, not only the Sabbatean believers but Sabbatai Tzevi himself was deeply influenced by *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*. Idel assumes that on the one hand Tzevi internalized the melancholic tendency connected to Saturn, and on the other hand conceived of himself as a redeemer based on the idea expressed in the book. Considering that Tzevi's bipolar personality between elevation and depression was employed to justify his messiahship, the triadic connection was very likely to function as a conceptual trigger of the Sabbatean movement.

It is true that, unlike Scholem's macroscopic historiography, Idel's approach seems to be restricted to a notional framework, yet highly intriguing for students of religious studies or history of ideas is his attribution of astrological symbolism to the messianic personality. Though an almost exclusive and deterministic association of Sabbateanism to the messianic idea in Lurianic kabbalah was accepted when Scholem's monograph was published, *Saturn's Jews* reveals that medieval astrology functioned as a universalistic cultural denominator for Sabbateanism.

As to the astrological horizon of Sabbateanism, I would make an additional remark which Idel does not make in his book. There is evidence that the symbol of the fish or Pisces, the twelfth zodiac sign, was also significant in the knowledge of Sabbatai Tzevi. According to a certain testimony, one day he bought a large-sized fish, dressed it up like a child and laid it in a cradle. When some of his friends asked the reason for this bizarre behavior, he replied to them that he had seen the twelve zodiac signs in heaven, and under the sign of Pisces, Jews would be delivered from enslavement. Scholem referred

to this event as one of the examples of Tzevi's strange actions in his elevated mood, and interpreted it as symbolizing the slow growth toward the fullness of Israel's redemption.<sup>4</sup> This episode is neither a mere fiction nor an extemporaneous performance. It appears to be latent in the Sabbatean tradition, and had some repercussion on another idiosyncratic custom which Scholem did not mention in his monograph. We have a later testimony that the believers called the Dönme, whose ancestors had converted to Islam after Tzevi, had a nuptial custom, whereby, in hope of fertility, a bride passed over a large fish dyed with henna. It was called *knalı balık* in Turkish, meaning "henna-dyed fish". Abraham Galanté (1873–1939) pointed out the phonetic similarity between "*kná*" and "*cuna*", which means cradle in Judeo-Spanish, and associated this ceremony with the apparently cryptic behavior of Tzevi.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that the believers of the Dönme had forgotten the origin of *knalı balık*, and so far no other testimony in the Sabbatean sources supports Galanté's assumption. However, we know the kabbalistic dietary custom of eating fish on Sabbath, especially at the third meal. The custom dates back to the Talmud,<sup>6</sup> and appears in several writings of the Safedian kabbalists in the sixteenth century, where fish are said to contain souls of the righteous or have eyes without eyelids open towards heaven. Therein lies a redemptive connotation. Though additional evidence is required to explain the possible connection between the knowledge of Tzevi and the sign of the fish in medieval astrology, the symbolic rite of the garmented fish in the cradle is very likely to have a similar sort of salvific implication as the planet Saturn. Thus, further knowledge of Sabbateanism can be drawn by the adoption of broader and more universalistic perspectives.

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*Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary.* By Fran Martin.

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*Backward Glances* identifies some of the common female same-sex storylines in Chinese literary and visual texts with a view toward teasing out their significance in the identity formation of women in the Chinese-speaking world. The book makes a case for the "unsuspected centrality" of the "passionate love of one woman for another" through the recurrence of two female same-sex scenarios found across the Chinese-speaking world.

As the dominant form, Fran Martin identifies what she calls a "memorial mode of representation" enshrined in the ubiquitous "schoolgirl romance." In this scenario, an adult woman recalls the forced termination of same-sex love between two school girls and dwells on the pain and regret associated with the transition to a hetero-marital arrangement, thus prompting Martin to coin the term "going in narrative" in contrast to a Western-style "coming out narrative." Martin argues that this scenario is potentially presented as a universal experience for "any woman," irrespective of what an adult woman's sexual commitments might be. Alternatively, in a second, less common narrative, the main protagonists exhibit secondary gender characteristics with one assuming feminine, the other

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4 Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi: The Mystical Messiah*, p. 161.

5 Abraham Galanté, *Nouveaux Documents sur Sabbetaï Sevi* (Société Anonyme de Papeterie et d'Imprimerie, Istanbul, 1935), p. 52.

6 For example, Babylonian Talmud 119a.